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Merging Parallels: Libraries in the Classroom

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Merging Parallels: Libraries in the Classroom

Part of the journal section “Forum: Cornerstone” [Contribution to Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

Gretchen Gould, “Merging Parallels: Libraries in the Classroom”

Here at Rod Library, librarians are always looking for new and different opportunities to reach out to students and faculty. With the deluge of information in the world today, it is even more crucial for students to learn and utilize information literacy skills. When the Cornerstone program was created, the librarians were asked to participate.

In the fall of 2011, there were ten sections of Cornerstone. This allowed each Cornerstone section to have its own librarian. I was paired up with Professor Yolanda Hood, and I really enjoyed the experience. On the first day of class, I introduced myself to the class and participated in the introductory class activities so that I could start building a bond with the students. I distributed bookmarks with my picture and contact information to all of my Cornerstone students so they knew how to get a hold of me at any time during the semester. I knew this collaboration was a success when I pulled up to the Starbucks drive-thru window and the girl helping me said, “I know you! You are my librarian for Cornerstone!” I was so surprised but obviously this partnership had already made positive impressions. I was able to work with the students multiple times throughout the year and even had individual one-on-one research consultations.

The students, as well as the professor and the peer mentor, appreciated the personalized and focused attention that I was able to give each student. Professor Hood had her students write a reflection piece after meeting with me for research consultations. Most of the students indicated that they learned research skills that would help them not only succeed in class but in the real world as well. Some of the students from my first class contacted me in the years after, when they needed help with their research. It is this kind of partnership that makes students prepared and successful. It is also very rewarding to me to work with the students and see them grow.

In the second year of Cornerstone, there were significantly more sections than librarians. The librarians decided to try a different approach. None of the Cornerstone sections had a personal librarian. Instead of one-on-one research consultations, the librarians decided to hold “library labs” at multiple times throughout the course of a couple of weeks. Each library lab session would have two to three librarians who would float around the room and work with the students individually. Students and peer teaching assistants would sign up for a specific library lab. In theory, the concept sounded good. In reality, the library labs didn’t work as well as we had hoped. Students would sign up and either come to a different session than they had scheduled or

not show up at all. As a result, some sessions would be overcrowded while others were sparsely attended. We didn't feel like this approach was as successful as the personal librarian approach. No personal relationships were created, and students did not have a librarian they knew they could go to for help. After much discussion, the librarians decided not to take this approach again.

In the fall of 2013, we decided to take the personalized approach again. Each librarian was assigned to be the personal librarian to three Cornerstone sections. The librarians met with all of the Cornerstone sections during the first week or so of classes. This allowed us to introduce ourselves, hand out bookmarks with our pictures and contact information, and remind everyone that we are here to help them. The downside to the personalized approach this time around was that the librarians could not do one-on-one research consultations with every student. The librarians focused on working with the classes and instructors to the level that each instructor desired for their Cornerstone sections. I was not sure how much of a difference it made until one of my 2013-2014 students came up to me this fall, hugged me, and said "Thank you for being my Cornerstone librarian."

In the fall of 2014, a couple of the Cornerstone librarians decided to experiment by making themselves available at certain times for Cornerstone students to get research help on the spot. They sat with the peer teaching assistants up on the third floor of the library. There was a small turnout, but it allowed the librarians to spend time with the students that took the opportunity and help them succeed in their research.

While there have been many challenges, the collaboration between the librarians and Cornerstone has been a positive, enriching, and fulfilling experience all the way around. If this collaboration continued, I would highly recommend having a personal librarian be assigned to each Cornerstone section. There is a positive impact on student learning with the hands-on, personalized library instruction each student receives from their personal librarian. In a perfect world, there would be a 1:1 ratio of librarians to Cornerstone sections. Unfortunately, there are not enough librarians for each Cornerstone section to have a librarian exclusively devoted to their section. As is the case with most universities across the country, budgets are significantly restricted. A restricted budget does not allow for significant growth in hiring in higher education. We can all dream, though.

For other institutions considering a course along the lines of Cornerstone, I would highly recommend implementing the course with a significant role for library involvement. Library involvement boosts student success and is crucial to students developing lifelong information literacy skills. Institutions that move forward with a Cornerstone-like course should consider the level of library involvement they would like to see and collaborate with the library to ensure success. If additional funding or staffing is needed, that should be taken into account and incorporated into the planning process.

Academic libraries are the heart and soul of every university campus. They support student and faculty learning and research across all disciplines. Librarians play a vital role in teaching and engaging their campus community every day. Bringing librarians, professors, and students together to learn, think, and succeed is a common goal that we are all working towards. Cornerstone is an excellent example reflecting the University of Northern Iowa's goals and successes.

[Go to the narrative [Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community](#) article.]



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